

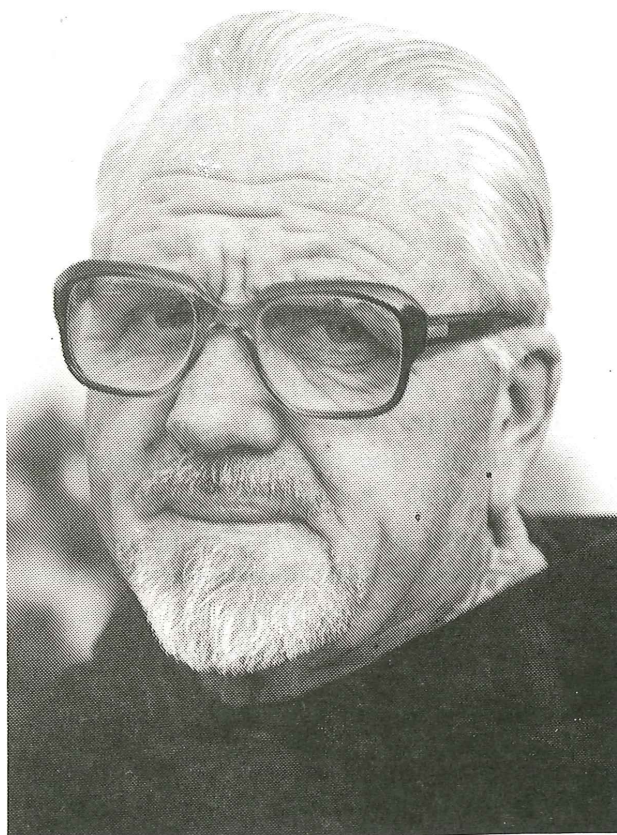
## IN MEMORIAM

### FATHER VIRGILIO CANIO CORBO, O.F.M. (1918-1991)

In the early morning of December 6, 1991, the Lord called Father Virgil Corbo to Himself. Only a few months earlier a severe illness struck him. Fr. Virgil was born at Avigliano (Potenza, Italy) on June 8, 1918. As a youth, ten years old, he came to the Holy Land and became a student at the Minor Seminary of the Custody of the Terra Santa (CTS). He was ordained to the priesthood in Bethlehem on July 12, 1942.

He was a student at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome from 1946 to 1949 and received the doctorate in Oriental Science with his thesis *Gli scavi di Khirbet Siyar el-Ghanam (Campo dei Pastori) e i monasteri dei dintorni* (The Excavations of Khirbet Siyar el-Ghanam (Shepherds' Field) and the Nearby Monasteries). Over the years he received a variety of assignments: teaching in the Minor Seminary at Emmaus el-Qubeibeh and in the Jerusalem Major Seminary of the CTS (1950-1968); the organization of the Terra Santa pavilion at the exhibition of missionary art during the Holy Year (1950); Director of the magazine *La Terra Santa* (1950-1955); in charge of the restoration of various shrines of the CTS (since 1951); a collaborator with the architect Antonio Barluzzi; consultant for some of the movie projects about the Terra Santa (1953-1954). He was the superior of the Franciscan Friary of Gethsemani (1956-1959), and professor of Christian archaeology in the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum (SBF) (1984-1990).

During the time when the Italian Franciscans were confined in concentration at Emmaus el-Qubeibeh (1940-1943) he became intensely interested in archaeology in the school of Father Bellarmino Bagatti and he made the first experiments in the excavation of the village. This early interest later expanded to the monasteries in the desert of Judea. He examined ruins and when possible he also made excavations. Sometimes he was able to identify ruins with monasteries referred to in literary sources: the laura "Eptastomos," the monastery of Zannos, the laura of Jeremiah, the laura of Firmino, the new laura



of Khirbet Tina. He had the great fortune of discovering a Georgian monastery at Bir el-Qutt, near Bethlehem, with an inscription of dedication from the sixth century. This is among the most ancient examples of that language found on monuments. Preliminary reports of his findings at the above-mentioned sites and excavations were published punctually in the Franciscan magazine *La Terra Santa*. More mature fruits of these activities were his doctoral dissertation, later published in the *Collectio Maior* of the SBF (No. 11) in 1955, and a lecture he gave during a meeting of the Pontifical Oriental Institute on oriental monasticism (1958). It was an important description of aspects in the daily life of the Palestinian monks.

Father Corbo then turned his attention to the archaeological exploration of two revered sites on the Mount of Olives. One was an area next to the shrine of the Ascension, the other was the grotto of the Apostles at Gethsemani (1959).

Then in 1960 the Custody of the Holy Land



assigned Fr. Virgil to be the archaeologist associated with the work of restoration of the Holy Sepulchre. He engaged in the excavations of the property of the Catholics and, thanks to his close association with the superiors of the greek Orthodox Christian community (Archimandrite Daniel Choriotakis) and the Armenian Orthodox (Bishop Guregh Kapikian), he was able to keep abreast of all the work done in the Basilica during the years 1960-1982.

The archaeological excavation of the fortress Herodion, during the years 1962-1967, was an impressive accomplishment. It reveals the extent of Fr. Corbo's organizational skills and courage. His research brought to light not only Herod's royal fortress but also the buildings erected there afterwards which included a monastery.

During the years 1967-1970 he engaged in a long and fruitful archaeological campaign at the shrine of Mount Nebo. For years, he was also in charge of the restoration at that place.

In 1968 began the last phase, which was also the most fruitful, in the life of Father Corbo. It was undertaken in solidarity of life and work with Father Stanislaus Loffreda, who also has a doctorate in archaeology from the Oriental Institute of Chicago. From that year until 1986 Father Virgil directed 19 exceptionally fruitful campaigns of excavations at Capharnaum. They produced four main results: 1) the outline of the history of Capharnaum from the Middle Bronze Age to the Islamic period, 2) the dating of the famous synagogue from the fourth-fifth century A.D., 3) the uncovering, under it, of traces of the synagogue from the time of Jesus, and 4) bringing to light the ruins of the house of Peter which had developed into a house church.

Along with his excavation activity, Fr. Corbo carefully restored the ruins of Capharnaum. He arranged architectural pieces of the synagogue and other findings around the whole area so that they could be viewed easily by pilgrims and tourists. He was able to spend the last twenty years of his life fulfilling his desire to preserve the precious memory of Christian presence going all the way back to Gospel times and at the same time to restore

the "House of Peter" to religious service. He had energy and tenacity beyond the normal measure which he used to confront and overcome difficulties and delays of various sorts. His dream was fulfilled on June 29, 1990 with the solemn dedication of the Memorial of St. Peter. This is a bold, modern building which shelters the ruins on the inside of the *insula sacra*, and at the same time both provides for religious services and makes available an exceptional view of the panorama surrounding it: the lake, the village and the surrounding hills. To all this must be added that he transformed the area of Capharnaum into one of the most beautiful archaeological sites of the Holy Land.

His work and stay at Capharnaum did not prevent him from engaging in campaigns of excavation at nearby Magdala (during the 70's), at Dabburiya on the slope of Mount Tabor (1978) and on Herod's fortress of Machaerus in Jordan (1978-1981).

Fr. Corbo developed a reputation for making known the results of his excavations in good time. In spite of his feverish activity Father Corbo never neglected to announce the results of his archaeological excavations in both preliminary reports and the final complete publication. The list of his writings includes over one hundred titles among which are these six main monographs: *Shepherds' Field and nearby monasteries* (1955); *Mount of Olives* (1965); *Capharnaum* (1975); *The Holy Sepulchre* (1982); *Herodion* (1989). The complete bibliography appeared in the SBF review *Liber Annuus* 1991.

In addition we must note his participation in congresses and symposia sponsored by various institutions. Because of his illness he was not able to participate in the XII International Congress of Christian Archaeology held in Bonn in September 1991 where, nevertheless, one of his reports was read.

In 1983 there was a clear indication of his merits and international recognition when Father Corbo was nominated General Commissary for the preservation of the cultural patrimony of the Holy Land in the event of armed conflict. It came from the Holy See, on behalf of UNESCO, in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1954.

On the occasion of its 70th anniversary,



the SBF published a valuable volume of studies on archaeology in which are described many of the Byzantine sites of Palestine and Jordan which have been excavated in recent years. This volume was the result of a considerable publishing undertaking which has made a notable contribution to our knowledge of this period which has possibly been the most prosperous in the whole history of the Holy Land.

Among the honours and tokens of esteem accorded to Father Corbo, there is one he prized above all others. In October of 1987 the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, His Beatitude Ellias II, on the occasion of a visit to Jerusalem presented Fr. Corbo with a commemorative coin celebrating the 1500 years of Evangelization of Georgia (1968). It was an attestation of the gratitude to the Franciscan Friar, who with the discovery of the Georgian monastery of Bir el-Qutt made a substantial contribution to the awareness, encouragement and hope of that nation in its struggle to establish its Christian identity.

We owe to the competence and intense devotion of Father Corbo the knowledge of the actual structure of the Holy Sepulchre and not just its sketched plan. As he himself described in the preface to his first volume, he worked "with the insight inspired by love of Him Who is the Triumphant Figure of this monument." In a most loving way he examined everything in its smallest detail, and never allowed himself to be overcome either by weariness or human resistance.

Father Corbo was not only an archaeologist, but he was himself a witness in the sites of his discoveries. Thousands of pilgrims and tourists for over twenty years

have met him and without fail he was in his work clothes. Still he was available for an animated explanation of the ruins. With the grim countenance of a mastiff he saw to it that everything proceeded with proper order and respect. He was the lonely force that moved the restoration of the synagogue forward, while personally seeing to the cleaning of the ruins. As a good Franciscan he could repeat with Holy Father Francis: "And I worked with my hands and I wanted to work." In his explanations he lingered on and was moved to tears. "When he turned over the key of the Memorial to Cardinal Simon Lourdasamy for the consecration he said, filled with emotion: "Your Eminence, after years of work, now are brought to light here the very stones upon which He, the Master walked and this house of Peter the fisherman. Peter could offer his Master only a poor house, today we wish to offer Him one more worthy of Him."

Now he is buried there, under the Memorial, along side the venerated house. The burial took place on December 7, 1991. Many notable Christian and Jewish persons were present for the funeral service. The Holy Mass was concelebrated by some 80 priests who came from all over Palestine. A large number of people also assembled for the funeral there in the midst of the magnificent scenery of Capharnaum, on a day of splendid sunshine after a week of uninterrupted rain.

English Translation:  
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